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## ABSTRACT

An informal coalition of the North American Indian Women's Association, the New Mexico Commission on the Status of Women, and the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor presented a two-day program in Shiprock, New Mexico, to provide employment awareness for Indian women. The July 24-25, 1975 program was attended by 200 Navajo and Hopi women who participated in a day of workshops which provided them with basic employment information (such as interviewing techniques, resume writing, employee rights, benefits awareness, and child care) and also provided each woman with answers to specific employment concerns. The second day was devoted to a panel consisting of an employee and an employer from all the major firms in the Farmington-Shiprock area. Employees responded to employer presentations of practices and problems regarding the employment of Indians, and both sought solutions to specific problems and concerns. Recommendations of conference attendees included the Bureau of Indian Affairs implementation of a paid Federal Women's Program coordinator at each agency on the reservation; the establishment of a youth center in the Shiprock area; and the building of an all-vocational school on the Navajo reservation.

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REPORT ON CONFERENCE ON EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS  
FOR INDIAN WOMEN

SPONSORED BY:

NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION (NAIWA)  
WOMEN'S BUREAU OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR  
NEW MEXICO COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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In February of 1975 some 450 Indian employees were laid off at the Fairchild Plant in Shiprock, New Mexico. Ninety-five percent of these employees were women. This plant had offered about 1/3 of the available job opportunities for women in the northern Navajo reservation area. The lay-offs came as a surprise to many of the employees and led them to question their rights as working women.

Adele Lope, who works in Shiprock for New Mexico State University's County Extension Office, received many of these questions. Adele realized that Navajo women knew very little about such basic concepts as the minimum wage, social security benefits, income tax, or laws providing for equal employment opportunity. As the Navajo/Hopi Chapter representative of the North American Indian Women's Association (NAIWA), she had made national contacts with Indian women. In particular, she remembered Mary Natani, a NAIWA founder, who is presently an Employment Specialist with the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor. Working with Mary and with Rhobia Taylor of the Women's Bureau in Dallas, and with Vera Norwood and Tasia Young of the New Mexico Commission on the Status of Women, Adele outlined a broad agenda for a two-day program to provide "Employment Awareness for Indian Women." The Conference was held at the Shiprock High School on July 24 & 25, 1975.

This informal coalition of a local and a national Indian women's group, a state agency, and a federal body, put together a series of workshops and a panel discussion aimed at providing basic employment information to Indian women.

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"Employment" means much more than having a job. One needs to know techniques for interviewing, resume writing, locating job vacancies. Successful employees also must learn how to use an employee upgrading system to their own advantage, and what rights are in all phases of personnel action from the initial job interview on. Other issues of equal importance in effectively entering and staying in the work force include an awareness of the importance of having a good health insurance program, a good retirement program, unemployment insurance; in having those fringe benefits which provide for a certain amount of security. Finally, employment leads to concerns with available child care, the exercise of financial responsibility and the possibility of one's children themselves entering the work force.

The program which was put together to present this kind of information was divided into an initial day of workshops and a second day's panel discussion for a specific reason. Employment questions, particularly when they are centered on grievances arising from layoffs, cannot begin to be satisfactorily answered without the presence of the employers. Yet, it seemed important to structure the conference to give participants a chance to clarify their problems by giving them as much information as possible on the first day, and allow them the chance to present their grievances and work with the employers toward some solutions on the second day.

The agenda for the first day included a keynote speech urging Indian women to become involved in planning, policy-making and politics on the tribal, state and national levels.

Grace McCullah, Executive Director for the Indian Development Districts of Arizona, delivered this speech. Frances Williams who is a member of the New Mexico Commission on the Status of Women and the Federal Women's Program Coordinator for the Department of the Army at the White Sands Missile Range, covered the status of the Equal Rights Amendment in New Mexico. During the lunch break, a NAIWA representative requested Indian Women to participate in the Miss Indian New Mexico pageant, and the state president of the New Mexico Women's Political Caucus invited participants to join that group.

The bulk of the first day was spent in small workshop sessions which were meant to provide each woman with some answers to her specific employment concerns. Claudine Arthur, a lawyer with the Navajo Legal Services (DNA) in Shiprock and one of the first Navajo women to become an attorney, discussed basic employment rights. Mary Natani, Frances Williams and Felice Espinosa, who represented the New Mexico Human Rights Commission, provided more technical information on employment discrimination. Eva Benally, Director of the Navajo Community College in Shiprock, and Virgie Sisneros, a job counselor with the New Mexico Employment Security Commission assigned to the National Indian Youth Council, discussed effective ways of finding and keeping a job. Eva Benally is an announced candidate for Vice-Chairman of the Navajo Tribe. Emily Velasquez and Vedra Pino, from the Consumer Education and Advocacy Project of the All Indian Pueblo Council, presented information on financial responsibility and credit. Finally, Duane "Chili" Yazzie, Director of a project for Concerned Youth, and Lillian Arthur, Navajo Youth Council Director for the Shiprock Agency of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, discussed employment problems of young people.

The three organizations sponsoring this conference cooperated in finding resource people to achieve a good combination of local people who understood specific problems unique to the area, and state and national people with a broader range of knowledge. Equally important was the fact that in each workshop, at least one of the speakers was an American Indian woman. Also, each workshop contained one bilingual person who could handle translating Navajo and English questions. A series of planning meetings and long distance phone calls culminated in a final planning meeting with local, state and national people on the evening before the actual conference.

At the conclusion of the first day, the entire conference met together to hear reports on each workshop, so that everyone would have some information on all the topics. This also gave the participants a chance to begin thinking about the questions they wished to ask the panel during the second day.

The second day's panel consisted of an employer and an employee from the major employers in the Farmington/Shiprock area. Represented were the Navajo Tribe, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Arizona Public Service, the New Mexico State Health and Social Service Department, and Utah International. The panelists were first given an opportunity to present a discussion of their employment practices related to Indian hiring and of their feelings for some of the problems involved in working with Indian employees. The program participants were then encouraged to question these statements and work with the employers to resolve mutual misunderstandings.

During the discussion, conference members were asked to consider four questions:

1. What are the problems Indians face when seeking and retaining employment?
2. What problems do employers face when recruiting and maintaining Indian employees?
3. What efforts are presently being made to employ Indians?
4. What possible alternatives and solutions should be considered when seeking and retaining Indian personnel?

The panel discussion was lively and exciting. As a result of the first day's workshops, the women were well armed with questions. The panelists gave short sketches of their efforts to recruit, retain and up-grade Indian employees, and some of the problems they encountered in doing so. The comments mainly centered on the growth of upward mobility programs and the difficulty of finding qualified applicants with sufficient training for upper level, professional and technical positions. Other points were made concerning the lack of adequate salaries, living facilities, and child care facilities in areas such as Window Rock.

The stress employers placed on finding "qualified" applicants led to most of the questions from the audience. One woman, Mrs. Stella Lee, doubted that many people "at the hogan" level understood what the word "qualified" meant. She noted the confusion of someone who got the best education she could in order to "qualify" for work, only to find that she then did not "qualify" for food stamps or housing when she could not find suitable employment. Questions from young and old centered on whether one should get an education and training when there were so few jobs on the reservation which this training suited them for.

As one woman stated "I don't know anymore how to educate my children."

After a short film of the North American Indian Women's National Conference in Michigan this year, the conference was concluded with the passage of several recommendations. Recommendations were made that:

the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) implement a paid Federal Women's Program Coordinator at each agency on the reservation; more conferences be held for Indian women on this same topic; New Mexico Governor Jerry Apodaca appoint a Navajo woman to the New Mexico Commission on the Status of Women; and the Navajo Tribe act as co-sponsor of future workshops in the chapter areas.

Concerns for the future of young people on the reservation were strongly expressed. Recommendations in this area include:

the establishment of a youth center in the Shiprock area; the building by the BIA of an all-vocational school on the Navajo reservation; and the abolishment of poverty level guidelines for participation in summer youth programs.

Finally, the participants recommended that Adele Lope be sent to Washington, D.C., to attend the 55th Anniversary of the Women's Bureau in September.

At the end of the conference, an evaluation form was given to all participants. Ten percent of these evaluations were returned. The ratings for the workshops were uniformly good, with the most popular being those on job rights, employment discrimination, and financial responsibility.

The participants felt that the conference should include more information on Arizona laws, since the Navajo reservation spans both states. Also, many felt that more distinctions should have been made between state, federal, and tribal sovereignty.

Other questions which were not answered, centered on what can be done to assure adequate child care facilities on the reservation for working women. All of the evaluations expressed a desire for more conferences with an extremely broad span of requested topics.

Those of us who put together this program felt that certain logistical changes could have been made to produce a better conference. First, the workshops on the first day were a little too long and should have been cut to one hour. Second, the reports at the end of the first day should have been limited to five minutes, since that session went on much too long. Third, the recommendations should have been made immediately after the panel discussion, rather than at the very close of the conference. This would have allowed for more participation by all the members since not all the participants were able to attend both days of the conference.

All agreed, however, that this first conference of its kind was an enormous success. Over two hundred women from around the Navajo and Hopi reservations attended the conference. Both the BIA and the Navajo Tribe declared the week of the conference to be "Navajo Women's Week", and gave employees wishing to attend administrative leave to do so. A Southwest Indian Women's Conference, patterned after the Shiprock Conference, is being planned and will be held in Window Rock, Arizona on September 24 and 25.

The pride, concern, and determination of Indian women who asked for this meeting and who made it as successful as it was, was best stated by one of the older women in the audience during the panel discussion. Mrs. Stella Lee gave an indication of the expectations of Navajo women when she stated, "We want the moon. The legends say that we have it anyway."